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CIA had big role in contra aid

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Evidence is growing that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) played a larger role in the Iran-contra affair than had been revealed.

Testimony by the leadoff witness in the Iran-contra hearings, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, indicates that senior CIA officials and agents supported private efforts to aid the Nicaraguan contras at a time when Congress had prohibited any United States intelligence agencies from providing assistance to the rebels.

General Secord says he met with the former CIA director, William Casey, on at least three occasions to discuss contra aid. It's unclear what help Mr. Casey provided, and his death yesterday could mean the extent of his involvement may never be known.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D) of Vermont says Casey "probably knew the most of anybody" about secret arms shipments to Iran and the contras.

Some senior intelligence officials say privately that they were unaware of the extent of Casey's involvement. Nevertheless, it is clear that Casey and some others in the CIA were aware of the extensive private aid network set up to funnel arms, military supplies, and money to the Nicaraguan contras - and knew that a White House official was deeply involved in the effort.

The official was Lt. Col. Oliver North, formerly a member of the National Security Council staff. Colonel North was fired last November when it was disclosed that he had diverted the profits from secret arms sales to Iran to the contras.

Starting in 1982, Congress placed restrictions on US intelligence agencies, to prevent them from helping the contras. In 1983, however, it modified that prohibition, allowing the CIA to spend up to \$24 million to aid the contras. Yet from October 1984 to December 1985 Congress specifically prohibited the CIA from "supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua."

One source indicates that CIA officers were unclear about just what assistance they legally could provide to the private resupply efforts, because even lawyers disagreed about what was covered by congressional prohibitions, and the prohibitions were

modified from year to year. "It was chaos. You had guys in the field trying to be lawyers," the source explained.

Nevertheless, it is clear that some officials did provide assistance to the private aid efforts. Malcolm Byrne, editor of a chronology of events in the Iran-contra affair published by the National Security Archive, says Secord "went into a lot more detail" about CIA involvement than had been made public.

CIA spokesman George Lauder declined to comment on Secord's testimony, citing legal restraints. "We'll let the hearings speak for themselves," he said.

Nevertheless, Secord's testimony indicates that some CIA officials provided direct assistance in establishing a clandestine resupply network for the contras. Besides Casey, Secord indicated that he received help from "senior CIA officer(s)" in Costa Rica and El Salvador.

"Tomas Castillo," the pseudonym for the CIA station chief in Costa Rica, helped arrange air drops of arms and equipment for the contras. Mr. Castillo testified before the Tower Commission that he had been authorized to provide help to Secord by two senior CIA officials. But agency officials were cautious about helping Secord, apparently because of uncertainty about legal restraints.

Secord complained, "We were never able to get the kind of professional intelligence product that I was accustomed to having when I was in the service, without which inevitably you run into trouble."

And there was trouble. The CIA, for example, did not provide weather reports in advance of some resupply flights. And, Secord recalled, some of the airplanes used to ferry weapons to the contras got bogged down on muddy airstrips as a result of unexpected rainstorms.

Secord's testimony indicates that

Casey was wary of getting directly involved in assisting the contras. During one meeting, the idea of approaching a third country to obtain money

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for the contras was broached. Casey, according to Secord, said, "I can't approach them."

Casey, said Secord, indicated that he would ask "George" (US Secretary of State Shultz) to make the approach. Mr. Shultz dispatched Assistant Secretary of State Elliott

Abrams to solicit money from the Sultan of Brunei. The Sultan gave \$10 million, but Mr. Abrams caused the money to be deposited in the wrong bank account, the result, he said, of a "mistake."

Some of the details of the CIA's involvement in arranging arms shipments to Iran also became clearer as a result of Secord's testimony. A secret presidential finding allowed the CIA to be involved in that effort, and no legislation prevented the CIA from doing so.

Secord testified that he was "certain" that CIA officials in Portugal were communicating to Washington details of Secord's involvement in shipping arms from Lisbon destined for Iran.

Secord also recounted a meeting with senior CIA officials at which the secret arms sales were discussed.

Secord said, "I was to be the commercial cutout" to deal secretly with Iran, since the United States could not do so directly.